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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses issues related to developments in computer and communication technologies in south Asia. The first section considers the Internet and its impact. Paradigm shifts and globalization are addressed in the second section, including the shifts away from stand alone libraries to library and information networks, ownership to access, just-in-case to just-in-time, print-based publications to digital documents, stand alone libraries to networked systems, intermediary model to end-user model, command-based systems to menu-based systems, linear to non-linear mode of access, hierarchical to non-hierarchical systems, one-way dissemination of information to interactive communication, bundling of scholarly journal to unbundling, stability to instability, physical format to formless data, and top-down to bottom-up systems. The third section examines the existing gaps and inequality between and within developed and developing countries. South Asia and its problems are described in the fourth section, including geographical, socioeconomic, and political factors, as well as steps in the direction of regional cooperation and socioeconomic development such as SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) and SAPTA (SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement). The conclusion points out the need to coordinate and consolidate the resources and services of different types of libraries in South Asia and describes some resource sharing programs in the region. Contains 32 references. (MES)

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South Asia in the Global Electronic Village: Issues and Implications

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Paper

The Internet and its Impact

The Internet is an amazing development of our times based on the convergence of the computer and the communication technologies. The traditional constraints of space and time are no more there and the whole world is almost becoming a global electronic village. The developments in computer and communication technologies have made a significant impact on libraries and scholarly communication. Now it is possible to communicate from a networked workstation with anyone across the globe as well as have real time access to digital documents. Hypermedia and multimedia are other significant developments of our times. International collaboration is now possible in teaching, learning, publishing, and resource sharing via various networks. The Internet-based resources and services, such as e-mail, ftp, http, bulletin boards, mailing lists, scholarly discussion lists, computer conferences, electronic journals, digital databases, various browsers and search engines have a strong potential to provide massive access to one and all. In fact, the interactivity and interoperatability of many of these networks and services must be integrated into our professional education and practice for value addition at every level.

Paradigm shift and globalization

There is a shift away from stand alone libraries to library and information networks. More and more people are talking of 'hybrid library'. 'Balance' between the print-based publications and

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digital documents has become a buzzword. There is a paradigm shift from ownership to access; just-in-case to just-in-time ; print-based publications to digital documents; stand alone libraries to networked systems; intermediary model to end-user model, command-based systems to menu-based systems; linear to non-linear mode of access; hierarchical to non-hierarchical systems; one-way dissemination of information to interactive communication; bundling of scholarly journal to its unbundling; stability to instability; physical format to formless data; top-down to bottom-up systems. Information has become fluid and transcendental. It is now separated from the containers in the process of digitization. Otherwise also, information has become fourth need and strategic input for the emerging information society. There is a paradigm shift in education also. Now-a-days, there is a trend towards individual exploration, apprenticeship, team learning, diverse and fast changing curricula. Above all now teacher is required to serve as a councillor and facilitator. This shift calls for the use of networked PCs, information access, skill development simulations, collaborative tools, email, networks, and a variety of publishing and access tools. As such, it is high time that we take cognizance of these changes and make our professional education and practice responsive to the needs of the emerging information society.

Existing Gap and Inequality

There are wide variations between and within the developed and the developing countries. Though the position of the elite institutions in the developing countries is relatively better, yet there is a perceptible inequality of access to the networked resources and services between and within the developed and developing countries on the one hand, and the elite and the ordinary institutions on the other hand. The developed countries and institutions are better positioned to reap the benefits of enabling technologies. But in spite of these technological developments, the existing gap between the developed countries and institutions and the less developed countries and institutions is increasing day by day, whereas the enabling technologies have a strong potential for bridging the existing gap between them.

Not to talk of India alone, the picture is not rosy in other South Asian countries also. In fact, we cannot call this world a global electronic village till the less developed countries and institutions are provided with networked workstations and training facilities. Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and the Maldives are four countries in South Asia where the position of library and information networking is far from satisfactory. India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka are relatively in a better position. It would be appropriate to point out here that it is very easy to retrieve quality information from the developed countries and institutions, but it is very difficult even to know what is available in one's area of interest in the South Asian countries. Very little information about librarianship and information work in these countries is available to the interested researchers. Therefore, the SAARC Documentation Centre (SDC), New Delhi must play a leadership role in this regard.

South Asia and its Problems

South Asia is characterized by asymmetry, in size, population, economic and military power. India is larger than all other countries put together. South Asia is a split spectrum of a once monolithic political entity consolidated and welded into Indian sub-continent by the British, mainly in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The breakup of this entity into seven independent states has given rise to centripetal as well as centrifugal forces. That is why SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) has emerged as a weak political organization, born of otherwise strong geographical cohesive expansion. The geographical hub of south Asia consists of the great plains formed by the coalescing basins of the Indus, the Ganga, and the Brahamaputra. They contain the nuclei of Pakistan, India and Bangladesh in their basins. South Asia's mountainous peripheral states are Nepal and Bhutan, nesting in the Himalayas on the north. In the south, Sri Lanka is a loose maritime adjunct to the Indian peninsula while Maldives represents the tapering end of the coral leg of this sub-continent, disappearing in the Indian Ocean. India has been so placed in south Asia that she has common borders with all her

south Asian neighbours, while none of her neighbours share borders with each other. Such a geographical position creates a peculiar situation with regard to socioeconomic and political as well as geopolitical relations amongst the natives of this region.

There is no denying the fact that diversity present in the earlier conflicts of south Asia remained the major factor that stood as a great impediment to Asian unity. India and Pakistan need to play a key role in this direction, but they have their historic tension over the Kashmir issue. Despite the linguistic and religious diversities and differences in milieu in different parts in south Asian region, there does exist a unique cultural unity in the sub-continent. Unfortunately the nations of south Asia have not had good relations with each other. The entire region is economically backward. The continued existence of problems like unemployment, poverty, inflation, balance of payment difficulties, regional inequality, etc. and continued demographic pressures have forced these countries to resort to massive foreign aid leading to heavy foreign debt burden. This has created a serious problem of debt, which eats away a significant proportion of export earnings of these countries. There is, therefore, an urgent need for these countries to develop self-reliant economies for their sustained economic growth and solution to the other problems. It is ironical that while this region accounts for nearly one fourth of world's population, its growth rate is only 2%, and even the inter-SAARC trade is only 3.4 % of the total global trade of these seven countries. India is easily identified as the giant in south Asia. It occupies 73.2 % of the total area of south Asia, four times larger than Pakistan and eleven thousand times larger than the smallest member Maldives. The growing regional consciousness and trends towards unification of hitherto divided nations are trends which may help to think more seriously about their own regional identity and the need for greater unity among themselves. This unity is now imperative in the context of increasing international pressures both in economical and political terms on the region as a whole. The south Asian nations being in the process of socioeconomic development have to be on guard against any attempt to undermine their sovereign status, be it in the name of human rights, environment, intellectual property rights or security.

The south Asian region has been relatively instable, politically speaking. The countries of this region can be categorized into two categories. The first group consisting of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, which covers the major part of the region, in terms of area, population, economic development etc. As would be clear in this chapter much of the development in librarianship has also been in the countries of this category, particularly in India. The other group consists of three smaller states of Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives. Except for Maldives which has the highest literacy rate (93%) and the highest per capita income ($726) in the region, Nepal and Bhutan are among the least developed countries in the world with per capita incomes $180 and $190, and literacy rates being 27% and 40% respectively. As far as development of librarianship and information work is concerned, these nations have not much to speak of. Nepal, however has made some progress in the field, but the Maldives, in spite of being the most literate of the seven countries, has not made progress in this field parallel to its achievements in its economy.

SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) and SAPTA (SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement) are good steps in the direction of regional cooperation and socioeconomic development of the countries of this region. The south Asian countries have decided to move towards building a SAFTA (South Asian Free Trade Area) before 2005, preferably by 2000 AD. SAARC, which came into being in December 1985, reflects the growing trend among regions to accelerate the process of their economic and social development through joint action - encompassing key areas of regional cooperation - arranging from exchange of trade preferences to agriculture and rural development; science and technology to health and population activities; and from telecommunications to infrastructure. In the long run regional cooperation must lead to removal of artificial barriers without in any way damaging the individuality and identity of people. SAARC has made some palpable, if not spectacular, progress in this field. The idea of establishing a SAARC Documentation Centre (SDC) at New Delhi was approved in principle by the Heads of State Governments at the second SAARC meeting held in Banglore in November 1986. It was decided unanimously

in this meeting that for the SAARC Documentation Centre (SDC), the INSDOC should be a focal point in India to look after the documentation activities. The work of the SDC will be based on published materials available with focal points, information about which would be compiled into a SAARC Bibliography. SDC conducts human resource programmes in information management in the SAARC region. It includes short-term courses, seminars, workshops, etc. every year. Participants are drawn from all SAARC nations and the target groups include work professionals engaged in library and information activities. The SDC should facilitate access to all information about Integrated Programme of Action (IPA) for interested scholars and other users. Possibility may be explored for disseminating such information through cyberspace, including the Internet. Establishment of the SAARC Net - The Online Computerized data Information System, headquartered in FICCI BISNET - makes a good beginning.

Conclusion and Suggestions

The countries in the south Asian region display a wide range of disparities, which add to their socioeconomic problems. Unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, inflation, regional inequality etc. are the lingering problems of south Asian countries, which cast their shadows on the growth and development of library and information infrastructure in these countries. Not to speak of other countries in this region, even India has not so far adopted any national policy on library and information systems. Even the National Library of India has not fully internalized the concept of library automation and networking, whereas India is required to provide leadership in resource sharing via networking being the largest country in this region. There are wide variations between and within the countries and institutions in this region. There is perceptible gap between rural and urban settings as far as the provision of library & information resources and services is concerned. Whereas, the number of library schools in India is far more than required, in Bangladesh the situation is totally the reverse. Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives have no library schools to make the trained manpower available to cater to their information needs.

The position of academic and special libraries is much better than that of school, public and government libraries. The lack of resources and political will are the main hindrances in the establishment, development and maintenance of public libraries under the clear mandate of law in these countries. Even in India, so far, only ten states out of 26 have enacted library legislation to provide comprehensive public library service to the urban and rural folks. The concept of library automation and networking is being adopted by the academic, particularly university libraries and special libraries in India. There is an immediate need to coordinate and consolidate the resources and services of different types of libraries in south Asia to enhance people's access to quality information in this region. INFLIBNET is an ambitious programme in India to materialize the concept of resource sharing via networking. ERNET, VSNL, and NIC are the three main service providers in India. In fact, there is a clear trend towards library automation and networking in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. The bye-products of information technology are now visible in the form of indigenous databases and there is also a trend towards electronic publishing. NISSAT (National Information System for Science and Technology), INSDOC (Indian National Scientific Documentation Centre), and DESIDOC (Defence Scientific Information and Documentation Centre) in India have really made perceptible progress in developing their resources and services. Similar work is being done by PANSDOC (Pakistan National Scientific and Technical Documentation Centre) and BANSDOC (Bangladesh National Scientific and Technological Documentation Centre) in Pakistan and Bangladesh respectively. Though in Sri Lanka, a modern technological information system has yet to be realized, even then the planning, coordination and formation of an effective library and information system for the country are the mandatory functions of The Sri Lanka National Library Services Board.

The position of library and information infrastructure in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh is perceptibly better than in Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives. Lack of trained manpower, insufficient funds, and inadequate materials are the basic hindrances in the expected

development in library and information services in all the south Asian countries. In fact, globalization is a complex phenomena which has resulted in a complicated interaction between " globalism " and " localism ", where huge corporations are selling products across national boundaries and creating a globally homogeneous culture of consumption. In this context the slogan given by the ALA, , is very significant. All the developing countries in general, and the South Asian countries in particular must formulate their library and information policies and develop adequate infrastructure to provide real time access to their citizens in a cost-effective manner. Efforts must be made to strengthen the SAARC Documentation Centre (SDC) New Delhi and develop connections with the East Asian countries. The international bodies, such as IFLA, FID, Unesco, IDRC, and World Bank must expand their activities in the South Asian region. At the first instance, the Internet connectivity must be ensured in all the countries in this region, and then the local by-products must be mounted on the main servers of the host institutions in a planned manner. Education and training, and resources consolidation and sharing via various networks is a pre-condition for enhancing users' access to global information resources and services. Otherwise, the so called globalization and the global electronic village will be lip service to the South Asian countries. The real benefit of this process will remain restricted to the industrial countries and the developing countries will continue to be used as consumers only. Real globalization can play a central role in our collective future by its potential to enhance individual freedom, widen opportunities for countries in the South, and increase democratic participation. In fact, the real global electronic village is that where there is equity in resources and equality of access for one and all. For this, there is an immediate need to change the mind-set of the 'haves' and 'have nots'.

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